

Are you afraid of Aunt Jemima?: Looking at Faith Ringgold's quilt

The work by black artist Faith Ringgold done in 1982 or 1983 stands out on the history of contemporary black art. The intricate quilt titled "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" makes one think just from looking at it. Having a composite border, the pulls you in bit by bit. Middle-aged black women of all classes dot the edges of the quilt and as one moves their eye toward the center of the piece, it becomes just that much more complex. Those of all races and professions each have a little box of words next to them. Closer examination finds this to be a whole and complete story in black dialect about a family in sections called "pages."

This is expounded on in Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, in which they note that this work is a tribute the author's mother while combining "the personal and the political [by having] the quilt include...a narrative - the witty story of the family of Aunt Jemima, most familiar as the stereotypical black 'mammy' but here a successful African American businesswoman. Ringgold conveyed this narrative through both a text, written in black dialect, and embroidered portraits, all interspersed with traditional patterned squares. This work...also speaks to the larger issues of the history of African American culture and the struggles of women to overcome oppression."¹ Martha Savage of Yale University adds something to this discussion. She writes that as Ringgold has helped transform the racial stereotype of Aunt Jemima which is typically portrayed as a mammy. Specifically, "text panels recount stories and visual images move in a linear and at times not so linear path. The narrative, sequential quality of these works can be thought to bridge the gap between traditional visual art and film."² Artist Nancy Doyle writes on her website that this was Ringgold's first "story" quilt which told the story to views of a successful businesswoman named Aunt Jemima to try to "reverse a negative African-American stereotype of black women."³ Some samples from the story show this to be true.

1 Fred S. Kleiner and Christin J. Mamiya, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*. 12th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005.

2 Savage, Martha. "Representation in Art and Film: Identity and Stereotype." New Haven Teachers Institute. www.cis.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1996/3/96.03.10.x.html (accessed March 2, 2013).

3 Doyle, Nancy. "Artist Profile - Faith Ringgold, African-American Painter of Story Quilts." Contemporary Fine Art, Art Instruction, Art History, Ancestor Portraits, and Irish and Immigrant Images by a Professional Artist.

These include: “Jemima was just like ‘em, hard-working, and God-fearing until the day she died... The same morning Jemima and Big Rufus had a fatal car accident on the way to open the restaurant, come rest their souls... They looked through, peaceful, have they was home.” More specifically, this story makes one sympathetic to Aunt Jemima overall, while also questioning the reader. In the last words of the story, Ringgold asks the viewer: “Now who’s afraid of Aunt Jemima?”

Now that one has given a brief description of the work, it seems relevant to provide some context. An eleven year old article in *The New York Times* by William Zimmer gives some relevant background in which they note that “Faith Ringgold is automatically associated with painted story quilts...is [also] known as an activist and political artist. If the notion of a quilt conjures up ideas of restfulness, that spirit is not found here...Ms. Ringgold's quilts, too, often have a religious faith-inspiring purpose.”⁴ Sharon F. Patton’s book titled *African-American Art* begins to provide some further context. The author writes that “since the late 1960s, Faith Ringgold...has used her art to voice her dissatisfaction with racism and gender inequality, and the absence of the black image...in contemporary art.”⁵ Many pages later, it is noted that Ringgold stopped doing canvas paintings she had done in the 1960s, instead making soft sculptures and story quilts. She describes these works as “feminist art because they ‘come out of being women and use of craft’...for her the quilt...seemed the most effective vehicle for telling a women’s story.”⁶ The time period in which she made this quilt, the 1980s, is very relevant. Howard Zinn writes in *A People’s History of the United States* that at this time in U.S. history, the citizenry was “disillusioned with politics and with what pretended to be intelligent discussions of politics turned... attention...or had [their] attention turned...to entertainment...[and] those at its margins became violent, finding scapegoats within one's group...or against other races, immigrants, demonized foreigners,

<http://www.ndoylefineart.com/ringgold.html> (accessed March 2, 2013).

4 William Zimmer, “ART; Politics With Subtlety, On Quilts and in Books.” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2002, accessed March 2, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/14/nyregion/art-politics-with-subtlety-on-quilts-and-in-books.html>

5 Patton, Sharon F. *African-American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 197

6 Patton, Sharon F. *African-American Art*, 242.

welfare mothers, minor criminals.”⁷ Additionally, the increasing criminalization approach to the “war on drugs” resulted in more incarceration of young blacks which negatively affected their community. As all of these changes were taking place, Ringgold made a statement with what one could consider a quilted painting. In an issue of the *NWSA Journal*, Ringgold tells an interviewer that some of her views are bound to affect the work as a whole, saying that artists don’t see themselves as part of a limited framework but rather giving their lives a sort of broad context. Later in the interview, Ringgold says if the stereotype of black men who walked away from their families had been true, which is countered in the piece in question, “we wouldn’t have survived, because there were no jobs for women.”⁸

But, how did this fit into her overall career as an artist and activist? Moira Roth expands on this in an article in *Persimmon Tree*, an arts magazine for those over sixty years of age. She writes that for over forty years, Ringgold has been giving people a “woman’s point of view” using the medium of “magnificently original paintings, soft fabric sculptures of “masks” and “dolls,” story quilts, and children’s books.”⁹ Continuing on, Roth seems to make it clear that only a few years before the piece in question was published to the public, she had begun to work with quilts and this piece began a new phase in her art career. About the work specifically, she writes that “Ringgold alternated portraits of Aunt Jemima and her family with short handwritten narratives that presented a revisionist reading of Jemima’s character and life.”¹⁰ This view is confirmed by what is written in the *Library Journal* by Katherine C. Adams. She writes that Ringgold “addresses gender and race from a very personal perspective...in a wide variety of media...to tell stories about African American history and black subjectivity.”¹¹

One must from this turn to further analysis. Thalia Gouma-Peterson’s piece in *Faith Ringgold, a 25*

7 Zinn, Howard. *A people's history of the United States: 1492-present*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 454.

8 Graulich, Melody, and Mara Witzling. "The Freedom To Say What She Pleases: A Conversation with Faith Ringgold." *NWSA Journal* 6 (1994): 10.

9 Graulich, Melody, and Mara Witzling. "The Freedom To Say What She Pleases: 13.

10 Roth, Moira. "About Faith Ringgold." *Persimmon Tree*, Summer 2007, accessed March 2, 2013 www.persimmontree.org/articles/MoiraRoth_AboutFaithRinggold.pdf

11 Adams, Katherine C.. "Arts & Humanities." *LIBRARY JOURNAL* 1 (2004): 146.

year survey, a book about the artist in question, is a good start. She writes that “Ringgold’s intention was to re-tell the story of the most maligned black female stereotype and reveal the true story never told before...The narrative combines elements of folk lore and anecdote with the African and West Indian Dilemma Tale, traditions Ringgold has absorbed from her mother’s storytelling. It mixes black and white people...But, unlike traditional folk tales that use stock characters which are morally absolute, Ringgold’s tale does not make absolute judgments.”¹² The use of a story quilt is important as a medium in getting her radical perspective approach across. In an issue of *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, this is confirmed. They write that “the emergence of the quilt as a vehicle for major artistic statements is the result of ideas germinated within feminist art circles during the last two decades. Faith Ringgold began working with this art form in the early 1970s, in collaboration with her mother...who was a seamstress.”¹³ This choice of this subject for this piece is important because for one it was done in the wake of the death of the artist’s mother and the fact that it counters popular stereotypes. Such a theme falls completely with her feminism and other views. Quoted in an issue of *Children’s Literature in Education*, Ringgold says that “often when I’m painting something, a lot of things come in and I don’t know why I do them necessarily. Many of the things I see reflected in African art, like I make my heads larger than bodies. In African art it means that the soul or the seat of intelligence or whatever, is more significant than just the mere body.”¹⁴ This issue also sheds light on the specific piece in question in this analysis, as the author notes that “in this quilt Ringgold tells about the characters’ lives and relationships in a story that challenges the reader to recognize and question his/her own stereotypes...[the piece] combines text, fabric squares and painting.”¹⁵ Since this time, the original piece has remained untouched as it still is meant to push the same approach today as it was

12 Gouma-Peterson, Thalia. *Faith Ringgold, a 25 year survey: April 1 to June 24, 1990*, FAMILI, Fine Arts Museum of Long Island. Hempstead, N.Y.: FAMILI, 1990.

13 Messinger, Liza M., Rewald, Sabine., Sims, Lowery S., Johnson, J. Stewart, and Adlin, Jane. "Twentieth Century Art." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Fall 1991.

14 Millman, Joyce. "Faith Ringgold's Quilts and Picturebooks: Comparisons and Contributions." *Children's Literature in Education* 36 (2005): 382-83, accessed March 1, 2013, doi: 10.1007/s10583-005-8318-0

15 Millman, Joyce. "Faith Ringgold's Quilts and Picturebooks," 383-84

meant to do in the early 1980s. The reason is espoused in a magazine put out by the Museum of Modern Art where Ringgold writes that “I don't know when a big change is going to happen for nonwhite people in art...So I think you have to keep struggling, and maybe the struggling feeds the magic. You don't know when things are really going to change...We should not go into the twenty-first century feeling that art is only made by white men.”¹⁶

16 Ringgold, Faith. "Contemporary Art in Context." *MoMA* (1988): 7, accessed February 1, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4381043>.